

Rome revived?

The city as a language of power

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In antiquity, the city of Rome was a canvas onto which emperors projected images of themselves that would command the admiration of citizens and visitors. At vast expense they built glittering temples, vast statues, ample porticoes, huge bath-buildings, spectacular mausolea, the colosseum – concrete demonstrations of the resources, human and financial, at the ruler's disposal. The city, whose splendour was renowned throughout the world, became an emblem of Roman power. Even centuries later, when the vast structures of the emperors lay in fragments or had disappeared altogether, Rome in the pages of historians or even in its imposing ruins could still demonstrate that 'architecture is the language of power', in the words of the German philosopher Nietzsche. The resonant associations of the city of Rome have made it, even in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, a vivid and evocative symbol for those who have seen themselves as heirs to Rome's imperial might.

The Roman salute

Benito Mussolini, the Fascist dictator who governed Italy from 1922 to 1943, made extensive appeals to the precedent of ancient Rome. The symbol of his party was the *fascis*, the bundles of rods which were carried by lictors and symbolised the authority of Roman magistrates. His title *Duce* was an echo of the Latin *dux*, 'leader'. He explicitly admired Roman rulers for orchestrating the emotions of the people through festival and rituals; he himself revived the ancient Parilia, commemorating the foundation of Rome, and instituted what he termed 'the Roman salute' as the official Fascist greeting. But Mussolini did not seek to emulate merely the trappings of Roman imperial power. The Roman spirit was to be restored and Italy would once again become a great military nation. In May 1936 Mussolini announced victory over Abyssinia – and a new Italian empire. Ancient Rome was a model which could give authority to Mussolini's position as dictator and justify his imperialist foreign policy.

Perhaps the most spectacular and certainly the most lasting demonstration of Mussolini's power and his ambitions is his treatment of the city of Rome. In a speech given in 1925, Mussolini announced his plans for the city: 'Within five years Rome must strike all the nations of the world as a source of wonder: huge, well-organised, powerful, as it was in the time of the Augustan empire. You will continue to free the trunk of the great oak from everything that still clutters it. You will create spaces around the Theatre of Marcellus, the Capitol, the Pantheon. Everything that has grown up around these buildings during the

centuries of decadence must be removed ... The millenary monuments of our history must loom larger in requisite isolation.'

The feeble past of the middle ages, renaissance, and baroque periods, associated with military defeat and foreign domination, was to be effaced. Not all Mussolini's plans for demolition were carried out but this speech makes clear Mussolini's ambition for a city composed almost exclusively of ancient Roman and modern Fascist buildings. Only the new regime, by implication, was a fit heir to ancient Rome.

Augustus and Mussolini

Just as Augustus had transformed Rome from 'a city of brick into a city of marble', so Mussolini sought to bring about the most dramatic transformation of Rome since the time of the emperors. Mussolini's new Rome would involve a resurrection of the remains of antiquity and also new buildings which would compete with them in grandeur. A new square, Piazzale Augusto Imperatore, integrating Fascist monuments with Christian churches and restored Roman remains, was constructed around the mausoleum of Augustus. Mussolini planned his own forum, to be called Foro Mussolini (now Foro Italico), a vast complex of stadia and cultural buildings, much bigger than those built by the Roman emperors. The centre piece was to be a colossal statue of Hercules, its right hand raised in the Fascist 'Roman salute' and its features resembling those of the Duce (100 tons of metal were used in casting the head and foot alone before the project was abandoned). As part of a new centre on the outskirts of Rome, the Palazzo della Civiltà Italiana ('Palace of Italian Civilisation') was constructed. While its square form conformed to the principles of Modernist architecture, its scale and above all its tiers of arches were distinctively Roman, earning it the title of 'Colosseo Quadrato' or 'square Colosseum'.

Enormous sums of money were spent on excavating Roman remains and clearing spaces around them. Many of the monumental remains in the centre of the city changed their appearance dramatically under the Fascist regime. These included the Roman forum, the Capitoline hill, the theatre of Marcellus, the republican temples in the Largo Argentina and the imperial fora. Mussolini singled out the Augustan empire for praise in his 1925 speech; his identification with Augustus is clearly reflected in his archaeological projects. The Forum of Augustus was the first of the imperial fora to be excavated; the Mausoleum of Augustus was extensively restored and the Augustan Ara Pacis reconstructed next to it. This identification culminated in the Mostra Augustea della Romanità, a vast exhibition staged in 1937 to celebrate the Roman spirit in general and specifically the 2,000th anniversary of Augustus' birth. Throughout the exhibition parallels were emphasised between Augustus and Mussolini.

The disembowelling of Rome

Certainly many Roman monuments are much more visible today than they were before Mussolini started work. But the Fascist excavations of Rome's venerable antiquities were often very badly executed. Much ancient material was lost or destroyed, with few records kept of what was found and many finds lost for decades in storerooms. Mussolini was always in a hurry for work to be completed by a particular date: his favourites were 21st April, the birthday of Rome, and 28th October, anniversary of the March on Rome (when the Fascists took power in 1922). Mussolini's authoritarian power enabled him to carry out urban plans with horrifying and relentless rapidity, often evicting hundreds of people from their homes at only a few days' notice. Here Mussolini perhaps came closest to imitating the Roman leaders he so admired. Though the buildings of the Roman emperors have acquired respectability with the centuries we may imagine that their construction too caused enormous disruption to the city's ancient fabric – and to its inhabitants.

Mussolini gave a new meaning to the Roman road, planning vast modern thoroughfares around (and sometimes through) Rome's ancient monuments to speed the flow of traffic. Monuments should, he felt, be integrated into the living city rather than isolated in romantic solitude. The great swathes cut through the delicate fabric of baroque, medieval, and ancient Rome have been graphically described by critics as *sventramenti* – disembowelings. The construction of the Via dell'Impero (Road of Empire', now known as Via dei Fori Imperiali, 'Road of the Imperial Fora') which ran from Piazza Venezia, where Mussolini's headquarters were located, to the Colosseum, makes clear just how much Mussolini was really concerned with conserving antiquity.

Not only did the road cover over almost all of the newly excavated imperial fora: it also involved the removal of an entire hill, known in antiquity as the Velia, and along with it enormous quantities of prehistoric, republican, and imperial remains, none of which were properly recorded. The splendidly level new road provided an excellent location for military parades, however, and was put to good use when Hitler visited Rome in 1938 to cement the alliance of the axis powers in the build up to World War II.

Building for empire

Mussolini was not alone in finding ancient Rome a source of inspiration and identity, though perhaps he was most systematic in his exploitation of Roman parallels. Hitler too was a great admirer of the efficiency of Roman militarism and of the order and discipline associated with Roman imperial power. He wrote in *Mein Kampf*, 'Roman history . . . is and remains the best teacher not only for today but indeed for all times.' The survival of the Colosseum still testified to the power of ancient Rome; Germany, he felt, sorely lacked grand public buildings to reflect the might and durability of the Third Reich. The plans he

commissioned from Albert Speer to embellish Berlin, the German capital, were Roman in their scale and their concern with symmetry. Specific Roman buildings were echoed; a gigantic copy of the Pantheon was incorporated in the design for Hitler's new residence. The new Olympic sports complex bore a far closer resemblance to Trajan's Forum in Rome than to the stadium in Olympia. According to an Italian contemporary, Speer boasted that 'he and his collaborators had learned how to build in a more Roman manner than the Romans themselves.'

Earlier periods also saw attempts to take over the symbolic power of Roman architecture. Napoleon, emperor of France from 1804, often expressed admiration for Caesar and Augustus. Portraits show him in imperial finery, with Roman eagles and laurels. Rome's importance as a symbol gave the city itself a particular significance for Napoleon. French successes in the revolutionary wars led to the occupation of many neighbouring countries including Italy. Officially annexed in 1809, Rome became known as the second capital of the Napoleonic empire. Napoleon's baby son was given the title 'King of Rome'. During the French occupation a vast and very expensive programme of excavations was undertaken to clear the debris of centuries from the monuments of the Roman forum and many other important ancient sites, including Trajan's Forum and the Colosseum.

Napoleon, like Mussolini, expressed particular admiration for Augustus' transformation of Rome from a city of brick into a city of marble. Under Napoleon, Paris was to be turned into a fitting imperial capital. Numerous buildings from this period evoke the buildings of the Roman emperors: two triumphal arches were erected, as well as the Roman-inspired Panthéon, the church of the Madeleine and the Stock Exchange. It is said Napoleon even wanted to transport Trajan's column to Paris. Instead he had to make do with a French version – the Colonne Vendôme, whose frieze showed, not Trajan defeating the Dacians but Napoleon defeating the Russians and Austrians. On the top of the column was a statue of Napoleon in the dress of a Roman emperor.

A fitting capital

But it is not only autocrats who have seen themselves as heirs to the Roman empire. We can also find echoes of Roman imperial architecture closer to home. Eustace's *Classical Tour of Italy*, one of the most popular guides to Italy for wealthy visitors in the early nineteenth century, lamented the dowdiness of London in 1802: 'it is to be hoped that the industry and taste of the British nation will . . . inspire artists with genius, teach even brick to emulate marble, and give becoming beauty and magnificence to the seat of government and to the Capital of so mighty an empire'. Though British rulers may have hesitated to identify directly with Augustus, later in the century and in the early years of the next attempts were made to monumentalise London and transform it into a fitting capital for a vast empire. Erected in 1842, Nelson's column in Trafalgar Square (a discreet relief on the base depicting his naval

victories) answered that of Napoleon, but it was perhaps only with the Edwardian era that empire came to define the architectural form of London's monumental centre. A ceremonial way, The Mall, was constructed from the Victoria Memorial, in front of Buckingham Palace, through the Admiralty Arch, to Trafalgar Square, whose buildings and statues celebrated the British empire. The arch clearly evoked the triumphal arches of ancient Rome. As the modern historian Thomas Metcalf has commented, 'Together the whole substantially enhanced the position of the king-emperor as the focal point of the imperial system.' More ambitious plans would perhaps not have met with the approval of British tax-payers and were in any case thwarted by the outbreak of World War I. Nevertheless it is notable that when it came to expressing empire in architectural terms, the British too chose a Roman vocabulary.

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